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Texas Instruments Pounces on Market In Home Computers

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Its Debut in Surging Business Costs $1,150, Is Aimed at People Lacking Expertise

By Richard A. Shaffer
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

For Texas Instruments Inc., a late start in the booming pocket-calculator and digital-watch markets didn't long keep it from becoming the nation's largest maker and one of the top two or three manufacturers worldwide. And several calculator and watch pioneers pulled out or went broke.

So when sales of the so-called home computer started to soar recently, and forecasters began calling it a major mass-market product for the next decade, almost nobody asked whether Texas Instruments would go after the market, too. The questions were when and how. The answers: Now, with a $1,150 machine aimed at people with little knowledge of computers.

The Dallas semiconductor company last night announced its TI-99/4, the first of what it says will be several home computers. The TI-99/4 comes when most companies already in the market are beginning to doubt whether the kitchens, dens and living rooms of America are ready for computers, and are increasing their emphasis on the educational, small business and professional markets.

"A Home Computer"

"We are calling this a home computer. We see the area of computational power in home electronics as extremely important," says Peter L. Bonfield, manager of the personal computer division at Texas Instruments.

Unlike most personal computers, which have programs, or operating instructions, stored magnetically through such attachments as tape recorders, the TI-99/4's programs are in solid-state packages that plug into the computer like eight-track tape cartridges. They contain as many as 30,000 characters of what is called read-only semiconductor memory. A recorder also can be connected, however.

The main memory of the computer can store 16,000 characters and can't be expanded, although recorders called disk drives can be added. Included in the computer system is a monitor, similar to a color television set, made by Zenith Radio Corp., that can display lines as long as 32 characters. The 99/4 is to be available in late summer at computer, electronic specialty and some department stores. The company said it plans to offer service through a network for existing products and through some dealers.

Initially, eight to 10 program packets will be available at list prices from about $20 to about $70. Attachments such as disk memories and printers will be available later. One attachment, with a suggested price of $150, allows the computer to speak combinations of about 200 words.

At present, the chief companies in the personal computer market are Radio Shack, the largest and a division of Tandy Corp. of Fort Worth, Texas; Apple Computer, a private Cupertino, Calif., company, and the Commodore Business Machines subsidiary of Commodore International Ltd., Santa Clara, Calif.

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